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The Crisis In Iran:

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Why The US Ignored A Quarter Century of Warning

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THERE CAN BE NO QUESTION of the strategic importance of Iran to the United States and its major allies. Iran shares a 1,250 mile border with the USSR, and is a critical check and balance to the expansion of Soviet power in the Near East and Indian Ocean. It now has a vast pool of modern military equipment, and armed forces of over 420,000.

Iran provides the West with oil exports of approximately 5.5 million barrels per day, has a total production capacity of 6.8 MMBD, supplies roughly 9% of US oil imports, and is a key supplier to Israel and Japan. Its gas exports to the USSR and Soviet Bloc reduce communist pressure on the world's oil supplies. Iran also has de facto military control over the West's jugular vein—the Straits of Hormuz—through which the free world must get roughly twenty million barrels of oil per day, or 37% of its oil production.

There also, however, can be no question that the United States must now re-think how to best preserve Iran as an ally and strong strategic force in the Near East. Specifically, the upheavals in Iran during the last year have demonstrated the US must re-think five critical aspects of its strategic relations with Iran and other key allies, such as Saudi Arabia:

- The US must accept the risk of broadening its contacts with all the pro-Western elements in developing nations. It must accept the unpredictability and independence of such elements.
- The US must adopt a new realism in providing military advice and sales.
- The US must improve its approach to analyzing the economic development of allies, and its control of the impact of Western sales and activities.

- The US must revise its policy towards assisting developing nations in educating their youth. Virtually without exception, half the population of every developing nation is now under eighteen. The US must help its allies to ensure that their students get an education that matches the capacity of their economy to absorb such student populations, and must re-structure the US educational visa program to reduce the radicalization and alienation of foreign students studying in the US.

- Finally, the US must re-think not only its approach to intelligence, but its entire reporting process on developing nations. It must introduce a new emphasis on realism in country team reporting, and in the policy analysis of the NSC, State Department, and Department of Defense. It must treat the crisis in Iran as a failure in policy leadership, and not as a failure in intelligence.

These are demanding requirements for changes in US policy. However, even a broad review of the pressures that led to the crisis in Iran, and of US policy towards Iran, indicates that such changes are vital if the US is to maintain and improve the security and stability of its key strategic allies in the developing world.

A QUARTER CENTURY OF WARNING

It is ironic that events in Iran could have taken the US so much by surprise. There have been countless examples of similar situations producing cultural and economic explosions since World War II. There have also been countless examples to prove that authoritarian regimes cannot put a lid on political instability; that when they try, the pressure builds up to the breaking point; and that in the process of repression, such regimes cut themselves off from the contact with their people that give them warning and time to react. The Savak, after all, followed in the footsteps of many other repressive secret polices whose ultimate impact was to cut off the regime they served from the people it governed.

Moreover, in Iran's case there were exceptional long and short term warning indicators. The US has been intimately involved in Iran since 1943, and it literally should have had a quarter century of warning.

The Long Term Warning Indicators

It has been clear for more than two decades that Iran is a society which is undergoing massive internal strain and culture shock. Its development, industrialization, and "westernization" have been achieved at the cost of pressures which have always been capable of suddenly and unpredictably exploding:

- **Exploding Population Growth:** While demographic estimates are uncertain, Iran's population almost certainly did not exceed 13 million in 1945. It had risen to 26 million by 1970, and is variously estimated as being from 33 to 37 million today, presenting incredible problems for any Iranian government.

- **And Exploding Youth:** Iran has an extraordinarily young population. Something like half the population is under 16, and two-thirds is under 30. This ensures a high rate of cultural instability, problems in education and in creating new jobs, and an inevitable "radicalization" of much of the population.

- **Unmanageable Shift to Urbanization:** By the late 1950s, it was clear that Iran was facing the inevitable problems of a massive and continuing shift of its population from peasant agriculture to "urban" jobs. Iran's urban population leaped from 5 million in 1956 to 10 million in 1966, and will approach or exceed 20 million by the end of this decade. Much of this population growth has concentrated in the capital city of Tehran. It, and its satellite towns and cities, have grown from 500,000 in 1940 to 2 million in 1962, over 3 million in 1970, and 5 million today. Something like 50% of Iran's population is now "urban" versus 38% in 1956, and 5% in the late 1940s. Roughly 15% of the total population lives

About the Author: Abul Kasim Mansur is the pen name of a former State Department official with intimate experience in Iranian affairs.